



# Eating the Torah:

## Is this Dvar Torah *Mishloah Manot*?

*Jamie Weisbach – Advanced Kollel*

### **Purim 5781**

On Purim, there is a long tradition of sharing “Purim Torah”—joking, lighthearted teaching that satirizes Torah with ridiculous questions and comically tortured arguments. Purim Torah can be a lot of fun, but at its best it can also lead to real insight, in part because of its willingness to stretch the discourse of Torah to a breaking point. I want to explore one Purim Torah-style question that I think has more to it than meets the eye: Can Divrei Torah fulfill the *mitzvah* of *mishloah manot* on Purim? While this question might seem ridiculous, exploring it can help us understand the fundamental purpose of *mishloah manot*, the power of Torah in our lives, and the importance of the physical act of sharing food with each other. Especially in a year when Purim is going to look so different from normal, this question may help us think about what is at stake when we try to reformulate *mitzvot* in new and unprecedented ways.

The question of Divrei Torah as *mishloah manot* first arose in the twentieth century collection of *teshuvot* (responsa) by Rabbi Hayyim Mordekhai Roller.<sup>1</sup> One of his *teshuvot* begins with a letter from his son-in-law, Rabbi Levi Sternburg, who sent him a Dvar Torah on Purim in place of *mishloah manot*, in which he argued that said Dvar Torah should be an acceptable substitute for *mishloah manot*. It seems that they were not in the same place for Purim that year, and Rabbi Sternburg was trying to find a way to give *mishloah manot* to his father-in-law despite the distance between them. While he

---

<sup>1</sup> Called the Be'er Hayyim Mordekhai.



accepts the gift warmly, Rabbi Roller argues that *mishloah manot* must consist of food. Their letters are suffused with deep mutual affection, and a simultaneous lightheartedness and deep earnestness. In other words, the best kind of Purim Torah!

In order to understand Rabbi Sternburg's argument, we should begin with some background on *mishloah manot*. What exactly are *mishloah manot*? In the Gemara (Megillah 7a) Rav Yosef defines it as a gift of at least two varieties of food sent to at least one person. This is the core of how the practice has been understood ever since, and the Shulhan Arukh codifies Rav Yosef's ruling (Orah Hayyim 695:4).

There are two dominant theories on the purpose behind *mishloah manot*. The first position comes from the Terumat Ha-Deshen (Siman 111),<sup>2</sup> who explains that the purpose of this *mitzvah* is to provide people with food to eat at their Purim *seudah*, the festive meal eaten on Purim day.<sup>3</sup> The other major position comes from Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz (Manot Ha-Levi, 108a),<sup>4</sup> who argues that the purpose of *mishloah manot* is fostering bonds of human connection. At the beginning of his plot to destroy the Jewish people, Haman described the Jewish people as "scattered and separate" (Esther, 3:8). Rabbi Alkabetz claims that the goal of *mishloah manot* is to prove Haman wrong by strengthening the bonds of solidarity that tie the Jewish people to each other through the act of sharing food.

Rabbi Sternburg argues that Divrei Torah can be justified as *mishloah manot* according to both of these positions. According to Rabbi Alkabetz, the purpose of *mishloah manot* is to unite the Jewish people with bonds of solidarity—what does this better than Torah? Torah is our shared inheritance, and the discourse that unites the Jewish people to our God and to each other. Food is one means of achieving the goal of unity, but since it can be achieved even better through Torah, Torah must be a valid expression of *mishloah manot*, even if it has not been the traditional one. Rabbi Sternberg struggles

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Yisrael Isserlin, 15<sup>th</sup> c. Austria.

<sup>3</sup> As support for this, he cites Talmud Bavli Megillah 7b, where Abayye bar Avin and Rabbi Hannina bar Avin would fulfill the *mitzvah* of *mishloah manot* by exchanging their Purim meals, presumably because they were too poor to afford food for both the *mishloah manot* and the Purim *seudah*. The Terumat Ha-Deshen argues that this shows that the ultimate purpose of *mishloah manot* is to provide for someone's Purim *seudah*.

<sup>4</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> c. Eretz Yisrael.



more to justify it according to the Terumat Ha-Deshen. If the purpose of *mishloach manot* is to assist with providing food for the Purim meal, how can a Dvar Torah fulfill this? However, Rabbi Sternburg points out that the purpose of the Purim meal is itself ultimately about creating joy, and this joy can also be brought about through Divrei Torah. The Divrei Torah may not provide for the food consumed at the meal, but they will contribute to the overall goal of joy and celebration that happens there. Additionally, Rabbi Menashe Klein (Mishneh Halakhot 4:91)<sup>5</sup> strengthens Rabbi Sternberg's argument by noting that the Rema (OH 684:2)<sup>6</sup> states that one must study some Torah prior to the Purim *seudah*. Therefore, Torah is a fundamental part of the *seudah*, and one can contribute directly to the Purim *seudah* through a gift of Torah.

Rabbi Roller counters Rabbi Sternberg's argument by stressing the importance of the body for the observance of *mitzvot*. Purim, according to the Gemara (Pesachim 68b), is a holiday that must be celebrated through bodily enjoyment, and not just through worship and study.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, turning bodily celebrations into intellectual ones risks minimizing what is actually the central aspect of our observance of Purim. In making this argument, Rabbi Roller draws on a deep tradition of viewing our embodied natures as central to our ability to observe Torah. The Beit Ha-Levi, a Torah commentary by

<sup>5</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> c. USA.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Moshe Isserlis, 16<sup>th</sup> c. Poland.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Roller's argument in full involves several stages. The Torah, in Devarim 16:8 describes the holiday of Passover as "for God", whereas in Bemidbar 29:35 it is described as "for you." In the referenced Pesachim, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer argue over the interpretation of this seeming contradiction. Rabbi Eliezer argues that the Torah here shows us that we have a choice whether to spend our holidays entirely in prayer and study ("for God") or entirely in eating and drinking ("for you"). Rabbi Yehoshua argues that all holidays require both: we should split our time between prayer and study, and eating and drinking. However, the Gemara notes that on three holidays, even Rabbi Eliezer agrees that one must spend at least some time eating and celebrating rather than just learning Torah: Shavuot, Shabbat, and Purim. The reason given for Shavuot is because it was the date of the giving of the Torah, which must be celebrated with food and physical enjoyment due to the connection between our embodied natures and our capacity to receive Torah. Rabbi Roller invokes a story in the Talmud to argue for why Purim is the same as Shavuot in this regard. On Shabbat 88a, Rav Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa states that when the Torah was originally given at Mount Sinai, it was given through coercion—God inverted the mountain over our heads and forced us to accept the Torah. The Gemara immediately pushes back. If so, why does the Torah have any legitimate claim over us, if we didn't accept it with full consent? Rava responds that at the end of the Purim story, when the *megillah* tells us that the Jewish people "enacted and accepted" (Esther 9:27) the observance of Purim, they also reaccepted the Torah, this time with full, uncoerced acceptance. Because of this, Purim could also be looked at as a day of *matan Torah*, the second, more fully binding moment of the giving of Torah. Rabbi Roller argues that it is for this reason that Purim, like Shavuot, must also be celebrated with food and drink in addition to Torah study and prayer.



Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveichik (the Elder),<sup>8</sup> argues that we must celebrate the gift of Torah through eating and drinking, because we are only capable of observing Torah because we are physical beings (Yitro 18). Only creatures who eat, menstruate, grow hair, and have sex are capable of observing the Torah in its fullness. Attempting to celebrate Torah purely through intellectual or spiritual activity misunderstands the way that our own embodiedness is a core part of our ability to be recipients of Torah in the first place.

In addition to his argument that Divrei Torah can fulfill the goals of *mishloach manot*, Rabbi Sternberg also draws on a deep tradition of analogizing Torah to food. Rabbinic tradition abounds with metaphors comparing the two, emphasizing the ways that Torah can serve as a source of life and nourishment.<sup>9</sup> Even more radical than taking food as metaphor for Torah, the Zohar reports (Zohar 3:95a) that Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai would study Torah in place of eating his third meal on Shabbat, because Torah was “the meal of the King.” Rabbi Sternburg cites this example from the Zohar as more evidence that Torah and food can be interchangeable, even when it comes to fulfilling a halakhic obligation that seems to be tied to food. Rabbi Sternberg’s vision of Torah shows Torah as a total force in our lives, the ultimate source of our friendships, connections, and joy, a source of nourishment that can almost take the place of such mundane acts as eating.

However, while there are many comparisons between Torah and food in Rabbinic literature, the Gemara also draws distinctions between them. On Berakhot 21a, the Gemara rejects an attempt to derive laws about the blessings over Torah and food one from the other by stating that they are incomparable: Torah is *hayyei olam*—eternal sustenance, whereas food is *hayyei sha’ah*—temporary sustenance. At first read, this could be seen as a minimizing food as merely temporary, but in light of the arguments seen above about the importance of the body to religious life, we could see this as a value-neutral differentiation: Torah and food are different, and we need both in our lives. We can’t live on eternal sustenance alone, but rather require sustenance of both kinds. Torah cannot replace food. Intellectual and spiritual experiences cannot replace physical embodied ones.

<sup>8</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> c. Belarus.

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy (8:3) even says that we shouldn’t eat food for sustenance, but rather the Torah itself! “For people cannot live on bread alone, rather people live on what comes forth from the mouth of God” (i.e. the Torah).



This year, many of us find ourselves in Rabbi Sternberg’s position, trying to reimagine *mitzvot* to reach across time and space to connect with each other despite unprecedented separation. Rabbi Sternberg provides a powerful model of halakhic innovation, with deep attention to the purposes underlying *mitzvot*, and a radical willingness to try something new. Nonetheless, Rabbi Roller provides an equally powerful warning against detaching *mitzvot* from their physical manifestations, and what can be lost in the process. Beyond either side of the argument, this process shows how embracing Purim Torah—wild, daring, and potentially silly—can deepen our understanding of Torah and its application in the world. I hope this year we can send *mishloah manot* in ways that increase our joy and bonds to each other, that reach across the distances dividing us, and that ground us in our embodied humanity.

